



Grieving is a necessary process, and we need to be open to encounter it in our own lives and with our clients. It's the only way to come out healthier on the other side of this.

PROCESSING THE LOSSES OF COVID-19

We are certainly living in unprecedented times. The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting us as a global community, and even though we are finding comfort in statements reflecting that we are all in this together, the uncertainty is wreaking havoc in our individual daily lives.

BY TAMMY BARTEL, RCC

As human beings, we desire certainty, and this pandemic is shining a spotlight on the reality of how little we can control when faced with a crisis of this magnitude. This uncertainty is generating a whole spectrum of emotions from feelings of anxiety and fear to shattering assumptions of being safe and secure in our world. Each day, we are bombarded with new information adding to the layers of complexity and the initiation of many unfamiliar feelings. Amidst the changes to what was normal and somewhat predictable in our lives, we are facing losses of all kinds.

DEATH AND NON-DEATH LOSSES

“Grief is a response to losses that are death and non-death related. [One] does not have to lose a loved one to death in order to grieve; grief can occur with the loss of hopes and dreams, and with the loss of self that may accompany life-altering events.”¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a life-altering event, and many are feeling the weight of grief. Grief is the response

to a death, but many don't realize that grieving is necessary whenever there is a loss of any kind. Living in a world with COVID-19, we have been forced to face the unimaginable: the loss of the world as we once knew it. Every person is experiencing loss coupled with uncertainty, as we don't know what each day will bring. This has rocked the very foundation on which we stand. One day, everything is going along fine and the next, we are in lockdown.

Darcy Harris, PhD, a grief expert, shares in a recent interview, “When events happen that don't make sense, our assumptive world is somehow violated. If things don't go back to what they were, we must grieve the loss of these parts of our lives.”² These losses include loss of normalcy, routines, jobs, income, connection, security, loved ones, and many more. How are we to be in a world that has changed so much, when life's familiar rhythm no longer anchors us in safety and security?

As clinicians, we are experiencing our own losses, as well as trying to hold the space for our clients and what they are experiencing. Each client has a unique story, a unique

set of losses, and these losses impact them in different ways. For the death losses, there is finality and a known loss, but COVID-19 has added a new set of circumstances to further complicate an already devastating time. Many have not been allowed to see or be by the bedside of their dying loved ones. The deaths have been sudden, family members have felt helpless, traumatized, and some are experiencing survivor's guilt. Having a loved one die is already difficult, let alone not being able to be with them for those final hours. The injustice will intensify the grief.

Non-death losses are less defined and depend on the person and how they respond. These losses are unique in that they are subjective and often ambiguous. Each person will see the loss in a different light. There are many variables to consider. Some have more work than they can manage, others have lost their job; some are health care and essential workers putting their lives at risk every

day, others are at home in isolation. Fear, anxiety, and depressed mood are rampant. The complexities and layers for each client are unique and require individual assessment. Processing these losses is vital and central to our work in this time of crisis.

UNDERSTANDING THE GRIEVING PROCESS

“Loss, change, and death are all universal human experiences, and each one of us will become intimately acquainted with the grieving process at many points throughout our lives.”³

Even though this statement is true, we are often ill prepared. Many of us have been taught to avoid grief, pain, and sadness at all costs. We are known as a death-denying society,⁴ and this has not served us well. We are flooded with messages of positivity, which are great to help pick us up when we are down, but often invalidate a person's lived experience of suffering. One of the most important aspects to keep in mind



I have compiled a list of what we know about grieving from research and practice in the field of death, dying, and bereavement to better understand the grieving process:

- ♥ Grieving is a normal and adaptive process that needs validation.
- ♥ Grieving includes the full spectrum of emotions: sadness, anger, guilt, regret, anxiety, depressed mood, etc.
- ♥ Grieving is unique to each individual; there is no right or wrong way.
- ♥ Grieving never ends; it is a life-long process that continues to unfold for years.
- ♥ Grieving is not linear and does not follow specific stages.
- ♥ Grievers have a right to talk about their losses; grieving is a healthy part of life.
- ♥ Grieving requires a turning towards the felt loss.
- ♥ Grieving requires caring, acceptance, and understanding from others.
- ♥ Grieving involves integrating the loss into one's life.
- ♥ Grieving can be facilitated through rituals, remembrances, and continuing bonds with loved ones.⁵



about grief and loss is that grieving is a normal, natural, necessary process. When we lose something, there is a felt loss, and in order to integrate this loss into our lives, we are required to process and grieve it. The process involves telling and retelling the story to others who can hold the space for, validate, and bear witness to our pain and suffering. It involves feeling all of the feelings and being allowed to grieve. Grievors do not need to be fixed, and losses cannot just be accepted and moved on from. Grief needs to be shared. Grief requires compassion, empathy, and attention.

GRIEF THEORY AND MODELS

There are many theories and models from which to look at the grieving process. I will highlight one called Grief Therapy as Meaning Reconstruction (GTMR) based on Robert A. Neimeyer's Reconstruction of Meaning theory.⁶ Neimeyer just recently opened a training centre in Portland called the Institute for Loss and Transition (www.portlandinstitute.org). I highly recommend this facility if you are interested in taking courses, workshops, or the full certification in grief therapy. GTMR consists of three basic components:

- 1) Assessing for adaptive versus complicated grief;
- 2) Processing the event story of the death; and
- 3) Accessing the back story of their relationship to the deceased.

GTMR uses a variety of narrative and artistic tools to encourage grievors to reconstruct meaning in a world without their loved ones, and at the same time, build the continuing bond relationship with the deceased person. Numerous techniques in each

HOW TO GRIEVE THE LOSSES OF COVID-19

- › **Keep the 10-item list that we know about grief at the forefront (page 24).**
- › **Name your losses; help your client name theirs.**
- › **For death losses, get to know the person who died; say their name.**
- › **Talk about the loss; share it with others who are good listeners.**
- › **Tell and retell the loss narrative.**
- › **Tune into the pain.**
- › **Feel the feelings, all of them.**
- › **Express the feelings with words or other creative processes.**
- › **Journal about your experiences.**



- › **Look for meaning through restorative retelling.**
- › **For death losses, facilitate continuing bonds with the person who died.⁸**
- › **Commemorate with rituals and remembrances.⁹**

component help clinicians direct clients in processing their losses.⁷

Since taking this training, I always think of these categories in how I will work with my clients. Sometimes, we begin with the client sharing about their loved one, and other times, we begin with the story of how their person died. I listen for the love story, I listen for the suffering, and I direct the client to turn towards the loss, and together we face the pain. We walk together in these sacred spaces trying to make sense of the incomprehensible. Processing the death event story, getting to know their person, and helping clients decide how they want to carry their loved ones with them (continuing bonds) is a significant part of this integration.

We can apply this model to non-death losses as well, in helping clients name their losses, discussing how the loss has impacted them, and processing these aspects with the client. Usually, there is an event and a relationship that is lost even in non-death losses.

APPLICATION

So how do we put this into action? We begin by having the courage to look at our own losses. We boldly ask people how they are doing. We listen and empathize. If it's a death loss, we ask about their loved one by name. If it's a non-death loss, we listen to how this loss has impacted their life, and we validate and empathize. We hold the space and allow others to feel what they are feeling. We don't correct them or respond with empty platitudes. One of the most difficult things to do is to listen and not say anything. This is essential if tears flow. Remember, we cannot fix the loss, we cannot make it better, but we can be with them in the pain, in the fear.

We can also make space in our own lives to feel our feelings. Fear, anxiety, and depressed mood are all part of grief. In grieving any loss, giving ourselves permission to grieve is essential, and when it comes, we allow it to be, we talk about it with

safe people and/or counsellors, and we express it.

Many people have told me they are afraid if they start crying or start feeling, it will never stop. We know that just isn't true. It's not always easy, but the more aware we become of our feelings, the more we can regulate them. And when we are validated, we learn that others care about our pain and suffering, and it softens it, and we don't feel so alone in the world.

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RITUALS AND REMEMBRANCES

"When words are inadequate, lean on ceremony."¹⁰

Rituals and remembrances are so important in the grieving process of death and non-death losses. When

the world feels out of control, rituals provide order in the midst of the chaos. A Harvard study in 2014 looked at the impact of mourning rituals after losses of loved ones and lovers and found that rituals, in all cases, mitigated grief through regained feelings of control. Engaging in rituals helps people feel more grounded and connected to others. Grief rituals and remembrances are a key part of the grieving process.

"Mourning activities help us make



SELF-CARE FOR COUNSELLORS IN LIGHT OF COVID-19



Typically, caregivers are not great at taking care of themselves. Now more than ever, we must ask ourselves if we are taking care of our own needs as well as the needs of others. The COVID-19 pandemic has

added a huge load to most mental health care workers. Many are busier than ever; others are finding it difficult to switch to tele-health platforms. And most recently, we have been faced with decisions of whether or not to see clients in person. Some have already navigated this, and others are waiting.

These are really difficult decisions to make. We are living a moment in history that is unprecedented with looming uncertainty of

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what lies ahead. It is essential to step up our self-care practices to prepare for what is to come. The most significant thing I have done for my personal self-care has been to set up a sacred space for me: my own calm corner. I recommend this to all of my clients, and I recommend it to each one of you. Begin by finding a place in your home or on your deck. I have a spot on my deck I have claimed as my own. It overlooks a green space and has become my refuge. I have a wicker chair with comfy cushions and an ottoman. I also have a beautiful, soft, cuddly, lumbar pillow. I have used this chair as my place of rest for three years now, and I wouldn't trade it for the world. I also have a favourite blanket, a favourite mug, and essential oils for grounding when I am in my space. Every time I sit there, I take in a few deep belly breaths and feel the weight of the world lighten just a little. I can breathe in this space, I can cry in this space, I can zone out in this space. This space holds me when everything around me is spinning out of control. Sometimes I sit out there too often. But maybe it's just enough.

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self-care must do's for uncertain times

- 1 Get rest whenever possible.
- 2 Stay hydrated and eat reasonably well.
- 3 Connect with others (hug those in your circles often).
- 4 Establish routines but expect disruptions.
- 5 Express yourself.
- 6 Be kind to yourself and others.
- 7 Limit media intake.
- 8 Breathe; practise calming strategies daily.
- 9 Move; repetitive movements can be self-soothing and self-regulating.
- 10 Set up your own calm corner.



the painful but necessary transition from life before the death to life after the death. Our grief is our love in a new context and like our love, sharing it and expressing it in ways we find comforting or meaningful as much as and as often as it tugs at us — makes all the difference.”¹¹

Ceremonies foster healing after traumatic death and will be essential in response to COVID-19 circumstances. Every time we have a ritual or remembrance, it helps us process and integrate the loss a little more.

THE LONG ROAD AHEAD

“How we survive this pandemic depends on how well we take care of each other during this time.”¹²

There is a long road ahead in walking alongside, holding the space for, and witnessing the very difficult things that our clients will have experienced. The losses due to COVID-19 are still occurring — they are pervasive, and too numerous to count — but one thing we know for certain: we will spend a lifetime processing them.

A Harvard study in 2014 looked at the impact of mourning rituals after losses of loved ones and lovers and found that rituals, in all cases, mitigated grief through regained feelings of control.

Let’s take a deep breath together, vow to process our own losses and make time for self-care. This will better enable us to hold the space for others who will desperately need us in the years to come. The mental health of our communities depends on it. ■

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